

In Memoriam

JOHN MCCAFFREY, M.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.

The Scottish Church History Society lost one of its best-loved members with the death of John McCaffrey on 19th July 2002 at the age of 68. John was a very active Vice-President of the Society between 1989 and 1992, and served as its President between 1992 and 1995, leading it with the generous, quiet, and kindly authority, unswerving devotion to duty and deep personal integrity, which were John's hallmarks. Typically, John saw leadership as a chance to serve others.

John was born in 1933 in Rutherglen, the eldest of three brothers. On leaving school he worked in the Glasgow office of the registrar of births, marriages and deaths. Only after national service and a further stint in the registrar's office did John take up a place at Glasgow University. He graduated with honours in history in 1962 and the following year was appointed to an assistant lectureship in Scottish History. John served loyally in the Department of Scottish History for over thirty years, eventually becoming its Head during the transition between the retirement of Professor Archie Duncan and the arrival of Professor Ted Cowan. John was modest about his achievements as Head of Department, but all who served under him speak eloquently of his wise governance, skilful administration and selfless devotion to the Department during his successful tenure of the Headship. Above all, John is remembered as a caring teacher. There are many committed teachers, and John was undoubtedly committed; but too often commitment to a subject can blind the teacher to the particular needs or unfortunate circumstances of the individual student. Everyone was special in John's eyes. John brought the ethical precepts of Christianity – firmly but unobtrusively – into his pastoral dealings with students.

Yet John was equally committed to the highest standards in academic life. John was himself a meticulous scholar, remorseless in his attention to detail. I remember vividly the pain – not unmixed with incomprehension – which he experienced on discovering that modern publishing houses and their small armies of editors, proofreaders and typesetters did not share his commitment to accuracy. John's unblinking resolution in face of the messy

particularity of the past enabled him to resist the lure of the glib certainties which other historians of the nineteenth-century found in grand theory. John knew that truth – whether preserved from typesetter’s error, from the straitjacket of theory, or from personal dishonesty in daily life – constituted a seamless whole. Ethical probity laid the foundations of the scrupulous and insightful scholar.

As a scholar John will be best remembered for his judicious volume *Scotland in the Nineteenth Century* (1998). Though underpinned by a rich seam of archival scholarship, its analysis of sufficient suppleness and nuance to satisfy the most demanding of his colleagues, John’s magisterial survey is clearly aimed at the students whose immediate needs were greater than those of his fellow scholars. In clear and elegant prose, John demystifies for students the complexities of Victorian high politics, synthesises political, social and economic trends, and provides succinct answers to the sorts of questions with which examiners might torment them. John also edited *Shadow’s Midnight Scenes and Social Photographs* (1976) and produced a number of articles across a wide range of issues in modern Scottish history. This breadth of interest is significant in itself; for John in his scholarly work discussed with tremendous and unexpected sympathy both sides of Scotland’s religious divide, whether Irish Catholic immigrants or Liberal Unionist politicians. In some of his shrewdest articles, John explored the career of Thomas Chalmers, his historical antennae finely attuned to the predicament and aspirations of the evangelical Presbyterian. John also wrote a short biography of Chalmers, which remains in typescript. No other historian of modern Scotland has made such a sustained scholarly commitment to ecumenical understanding. Indeed, when I first met John I was puzzled by this unfamiliar range of historical and ecclesiastical affinities. One guessed pretty soon that John was the model of a Christian gentleman; but his denominational allegiance proved more elusive. Good manners dictated that I couldn’t ask him outright if he were Catholic or Protestant; and his diverse *oeuvre* did not produce obvious answers. John was, of course, a committed Catholic, his life grounded in the faith. He worked tirelessly behind the scenes for the *Innes Review* and the Scottish Catholic Historical Association. Yet, clearly, Catholicism did not set limits to John’s historical imagination or to his religious sympathies. The depth

and warmth of John's historical response to Chalmers provide admirable models for both historical and ecumenical best practice.

A loving and beloved family man, John is survived by his wife Caroline, his three children, his grandchildren and his brothers, as well as by many colleagues who recognise the immense depth of the family's loss.

C.K.

